



## **Young Farmers at Stone Barns Center: Adriane Tillman**

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“Look for a good set of shoulders on the tomatoes,” said vegetable farmer Jack Algieri, as we walk down row after row of tomato crop to select seeds for another year’s planting. “Look for a plant that consistently produces strong fruit with healthy leaves.”

We inspect bulging red varieties, small lemon-shaped heirlooms, white full tomatoes with dimples and curves (appropriately named White Beauty). We pick our way through 30 different varieties of heirloom tomatoes.

As a 26-year old apprentice at the farm, it was my first attempt to save the seeds from a plant. I chose this tomato over that one and performed a simple, profound act of artificial selection. The next step was to squeeze those preferred tomatoes into a cup to ferment their juices and break down the gelatinous sack surrounding the seeds, which inhibits the seeds from sprouting inside the wet tomato. In the wild, the tomato would have fallen to the ground, fermented and released the seed to germinate into the soil.

Amazing.

Somehow I found this tomato’s life with its simple mechanism for propagating its offspring fascinating.

This scenario of learning about an aspect of a plant and tangibly intervening to help it grow better thrilled me and repeated itself daily at Stone Barns. I was caught up in my own version of the popular film series “Planet Earth.” In this quaint, six-acre field at Stone Barns, I saw, for the first time, thorny artichokes (man’s favorite thistle) flower soft purple tops, and I marveled at the transformation of a squash blossom into a zucchini!

Not surprisingly I had had little exposure to this world of cultivated crops or the wild plants I also learned to gather. In May, I had left my young, three-year career as a newspaper journalist to pursue a passion I had developed for fresh, well-grown vegetables since frequenting the bountiful farmer’s markets in New York City. You could say these colorful fruits and vegetables led my taste buds straight to the source: the soil.

Growing crops at Stone Barns, however, is not just an art (the palate is certainly colorful enough); it’s a science as well. For example, one employee at Stone Barns is devoted entirely to developing nutrient-rich compost to replenish the soil, composed of living and dead organisms from all over the farm: the weeds we pull; the crops dead from a summer of fruiting; the pig and chicken carcasses; and the crumbs of café pastries thrown in the “compost” trash. This employee’s title rings with the professionalism entailed: Director of Nutrient Management. Don’t get me wrong,

compost crafted and turned at home will work as well, but farming organically demands the same mastery and efficiency of any business to achieve its most delicious, productive outcome! Stone Barns sets a high standard so necessary in a country that devotes very little research money to organic farming.

In this setting, I learned the importance of the farmer involved. The farmer forms her plan around the seasons and must not miss a beat in its rhythm! Weeds not whacked soon enough will do what nature intended: flourish into a flower and spread its seed across the field, enabling many more weeds! Crops not harvested in a timely fashion turn woody and inedible and spoil the hours of effort put forth.

Somehow these basic business principles of time management seem so much more elegant when it is feathery fennel tops swaying in the breeze, hoed free of weeds, than a newspaper deadline!

My apprenticeship at the farm lasted through the hot, draining summer into a crisp, rewarding fall. Soon it was the end of September and we were tossing pumpkins, hubbard squash and pink banana squash to each other to load into truck beds and get ready to sell.

“The hubbard squash is my favorite,” remarked a friend as she tossed me the squash that resembled a spinning top. “It reminds me of a Monet painting with its sunset hue that streaks across its blue-gray skin.” I appreciated her observation.

The six-acre landscape had steadily changed from a luscious green jungle into a patchwork of skeleton plants and blanketing cover crops. Corn stalks stood golden and skinny and forage radish, planted as a cover crop to break-up the soil over the winter, spread green across the field.

Now it's December. My apprenticeship at Stone Barns is over and I have just planted six beds of garlic at a small family farm in Oxfordshire, England. Here, the sun peaks out less than in northeast America but the weather is more temperate. The family is focused on the chickens, eggs and sheep, and has asked me to organize the vegetable production. A novice to farming, I hold a book in one hand and a spade in the other. I've sent out soil samples, ordered seed, built a compost pile and started raising vegetable beds. The soil is waterlogged. Every tool is rusted. I work alone most of the day.

The farming lifestyle has completely captured me. I have only just begun, and my experiences thus far have been plush, but the challenge is thrilling, invigorating and, hopefully, will yield deliciously.

*Adriane Tillman was a Four Season Farm apprentice at Stone Barns Center from May to November 2008.*